

STATUS OF WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

by

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DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination against women is a feature common in all societies. Whether in Africa, America, Asia or Europe, the prejudice and obstacles that women have to encounter and surmount seemed almost identical. The peculiar disability attached to women all over the world is based on religious bias. Women's basic disability originates in religion. Women are depicted as temptress and are warned against in almost all religions of the world.

According to certain religious mythological concept, man was introduced as the son of God, but woman never found a similar standing as the daughter of God. Amongst the soul-believers, some held the notion that a soul exists only in man and not in woman. Those who claimed that woman too had a soul would not give credence that her soul could find a place in heaven after her death. Such were the strange beliefs amongst certain religious societies.

Women have also been regarded as the source of all the sins of the world and that they are blamed for the misfortunes on men in this world and the next. There was also the belief that as women, no salvation could be gained - they had to be reincarnated as men before they are able to gain their salvation.

Certain fanatical religious cults have also prohibited women from reading the religious scriptures. The punishment for doing so was to have their tongues cut out. They were also discouraged from entering places of worship. If they were at all allowed to participate in religious practices, such participation was only confined within their own homes, attending to household religious ceremonies. Such hindrances and obstructions in the matter of moral and spiritual upliftment of women still exist in varying degrees in certain parts of the world, even though many barriers have been removed.

In contrast to such hindrances and bigoted religious practices, Buddhism can certainly claim to have the least discriminatory attitudes against women.

There is not the slightest doubt that the Buddha was the first religious teacher who had given women equal and unfettered opportunities in the field of spiritual development. Although he had pointed out on several occasions, the natural tendencies and weakness of women, he had also given due credit to their abilities and capabilities. He had truly paved the way for women to lead a full religious life. They were able to develop and purify their minds and realize the bliss of Nibbana in as much as men could. The testimonies of the Theris (Nuns) in the days of the Buddha speak amply of this fact.

The Buddha had opened the gates for the full participation of women in the field of religion by making them eligible for admission to what was known as the Bhikkuni Sangha - the Order of Nuns which truly opened to women new avenues of culture and social service and ample opportunities for public life. This had brought them to a recognition of their importance to society and greatly enhanced the status of women.

SOCIAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN AT THE TIME OF THE BUDDHA

The social attitude towards women in pre-Buddhist days can be traced from the early Vedic literature, such as the Rigveda. There is evidence indicating the honour and respect which women received in their homes. In the realm of religion too, they had access to the highest knowledge of the Absolute or Brahma. However, such a liberal attitude towards women changed with the course of

time, under the influence and dominance of the priestly caste along with their priest-crafts, animal sacrifices, and other ritualistic practices. New interpretations were given to the scriptures. Women came to be considered as greatly inferior to men - both physically and mentally.

Women were looked down upon as a mere possession or a thing. Her place was the home, under the complete whims and fancies of her husband. She not only had to perform all the domestic chores, but also had to bring up a large family. Some of the priestly caste Brahmins married and lived with their wives, yet regarded food -cooked by women impure and unfit to eat. A myth was built up - that all women were regarded as sinful and the only way to keep them out of mischief was to keep them occupied endlessly with the task of motherhood and domestic duties.

If a married woman had no children or failed to produce any male offspring, she might be superseded by a second or third wife or even turned out of the house; for there was the strong belief that there must be a male child for the continuance of family line and the performance of the 'rites of the ancestors'. The traditional belief was that only a son could carry out such rituals which were thought to be very necessary for bringing peace and security to the father and grandfather after their death, otherwise they might return as ghosts to harry the family. Uncertain were the lives of married women. No less uncertainty await the unmarried ones. As marriage was considered a holy sacrament, a young girl who did not marry was badly criticized and despised by society.

In the field of religious practices, the position which they once enjoyed, was denied to them. A woman was believed to be unable to go to heaven through her own merits. She could not worship by herself, and it was believed that she could only reach heaven through unquestioning obedience to her husband, even if he happened to be a wicked person. The food left over by her husband was often the food for the woman..

It was in the midst of such extreme social discrimination and degrading attitudes towards women that the Buddha made his appearance in India. His teachings on the real nature of life and death -about karma and samsaric wanderings, gave rise to considerable changes in the social attitudes towards women in his days.

According to what the Buddha taught about the Law of Karma, one is responsible for one's own action and its consequence. The well-being of a father or grandfather does not depend upon the action of the son or grandson. They were responsible for their own actions. Such enlightened teachings helped to correct the views of many people and naturally reduced the anxiety of women who were unable to produce sons to perform the 'rites of the ancestors'.

In early Buddhist period, an unmarried girl could go along, unabused, contented and adequately occupied in caring for parent and younger brothers and sisters. She might even become the owner of great possessions, of slaves, and rich fields; as did Subha, the daughter of a goldsmith, during the time of the Buddha. But when the Dhamma was taught to her by Mahapajapati, Subha realized the nature of all fleeting pleasures and that 'silver and gold lead neither to peace nor to enlightenment', with the result that she entered the Order of Buddhist Nuns. This act was a great boon to the unmarried women..

The teachings of the Buddha had done a great deal to wipe off many superstitious beliefs and meaningless rites and rituals including animal sacrifices, from the minds of many people. When the true nature of life and death and the natural phenomena governing the universe were revealed to them, wisdom and understanding arose. This in turn helped to arrest and correct the prevailing social injustices and prejudices that were rampant against women in the days of the Buddha thus enabling women to lead their own way of life.

WOMAN'S NATURE

Despite the fact that the Buddha had elevated the status of women, He was practical in his observations and advice given from time to time in that He realized the social and physiological

differences that existed between men and women. These were depicted in the Anguttara Nikaya and Samyutta Nikaya. It was clearly mentioned that a man's duty is his unending quest for knowledge, the improvement and stabilisation of his skills and craftsmanship and dedication to his work and ability to find the wherewithal for the maintenance and sustenance of his family. On the other hand it was stated, as a matter of fact, that it was the woman's duty to look after the home, and to look after her husband.

The Anguttara Nikaya contained some valuable advice which the Buddha had given to young girls prior to their marriage. Realising that there was bound to be difficulties with the new in-laws, the girls were enjoined to give every respect to their mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law, serving them lovingly as they would their own parents. They were requested to honour and respect their husband's relatives and friends, thus creating a congenial and happy atmosphere in their new homes. They were also advised to study and understand their husband's nature, ascertain their activities, character and temperament, and to be useful and co-operative at all times in their new home. They should be polite, kind and watchful in their relationship with the servants and should safe-guard their husband's earnings and see to it that all household expenditures are properly regularised. Such advice given by the Buddha more than twenty five centuries ago stand good even today.

The handicaps and drawbacks under which a woman had to undergo in life were also clearly indicated. The suffering and agony to be borne by a woman in leaving her family after her marriage, and the difficulties and problems she had to encounter in trying to accommodate herself in a new environment, were the trials and tribulations she had to bear. In addition to these problems, a woman is also subjected to physiological pains and sufferings during her menstrual periods, pregnancy and child-birth. These are natural phenomena depicting the differential handicaps and circumstances prevailing between a man and a woman.

Although in certain sections of the Tripitaka, some caustic comments were made on the wiles and behaviour of a woman, the Buddha in the Samyutta Nikaya, did bring forth many redeeming features in that, under certain circumstances, women are considered more discerning and wise than men and that women are also capable of attaining perfection or sainthood after treading the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha's attitude on women can also be seen when the news of the birth of a daughter was brought to his friend, King Kosala. The King was displeased at the news as he expected a son, but the Buddha, unlike any other religious teacher paid a glowing tribute to women and mentioned certain characteristics that adorned a woman in the following words:-

"Some women are indeed better (than man)
Bring her up, O Lord of man. There Are
Women who are wise, virtuous, who have
high regard for mother-in-law, and who are
Chaste.
To such a noble wife may be born a valiant
Son,
A lord of Realms, who rule a Kingdom."

In revelling the nature of women, the Buddha had pointed out not only their weakness but also their potentialities and abilities. Even though some of his statements may appear rather unpleasant, one will find, through careful observation, that what the Buddha had said about women in days gone by generally still hold good today. Although there exist in most countries more enlightened and fairer attitudes, educational and independent career opportunities are open to women. She still has to bear unpleasant experience and discrimination despite the powers she possess.

BUDDHA'S ADVICE TO MARRIED WOMEN

In advising women about their roles in married life, the Buddha appreciated that the peace and harmony of a home rested largely on a woman's shoulder. His advice was realistic and practical when he quoted a good number of day-to-day characteristics which a woman should and should not emulate. On diverse occasions, the Buddha counselled that a wife:-

- a) should not harbour evil thoughts against her husband;
- b) should not be cruel, harsh or domineering;
- c) should not be a spendthrift but should be economical and live within her means;
- d) should zealously guard and save her husband's property and hard-earned earnings;
- e) should always be virtuous and chaste in mind and action;
- f) should be faithful and harbour no thought of any adulterous acts;
- g) should be refined in speech and polite in action;
- h) should be kind, industrious and hard-working;
- i) should be thoughtful and compassionate towards her husband and her attitude should equate a mother loving and protecting her only son;
- j) should be modest and respectful;
- k) should be cool, calm and understanding - serving not only as a wife but also a friend and adviser to her husband when need arises.

In the days of the Buddha, other religious teachers had also spoken on the duties and obligations of a wife towards her husband - stressing particularly on the duty of a wife bearing an offspring for her husband, rendering faithful service and providing conjugal happiness and heavenly bliss. Confucianism also shares this view. However, although the duties of a wife towards the husband were laid down in the Confucian code of discipline, it did not stress the duties and obligations of the husband towards the wife. The teachings of the Buddha did not have such bias towards the husbands. In the Sigalovada Sutta, the Buddha clearly mentioned the duties of a husband towards the wife and vice versa.

A husband should be faithful, courteous and not despising. It is the husband's duty to hand over authority to his wife and from time to time, provide her with adornments.

Other useful advice was given to women on different occasions and under different circumstances.

ADVICE TO BEAUTY CONSCIOUS WOMEN

For the vain and beauty conscious, the Buddha had taught the lesson of impermanence. Khema, the beautiful consort of King Bimbisara, was at first reluctant to see the Buddha as she heard that the Buddha used to refer to external beauty in rather disparaging terms. One day she paid a casual visit to the monastery merely to enjoy the scenery of the place. Gradually she was attracted to the hall where the Buddha was preaching. The Buddha, through his psychic powers, read her thoughts, and created a vision of a young lady, standing in front of her. Khema was admiring her beauty when the Buddha transformed the created image from youth to middle age and subsequently to old age, till it finally fell on the ground with broken teeth, gray hair and wrinkled skin. This transformation caused Khema to realize the vanity of external beauty and to appreciate the fleeting nature of life. She pondered: 'Has such a body come to be wrecked like that? Then so will my body.' With this, realisation dawned upon her. She subsequently attained Arahatsip, and with the King's consent, she entered the Order of Bhikkuni.

ADVICE TO EMOTIONAL WOMEN

To women who were unduly emotional and grief-stricken on the loss of their beloved ones, the Buddha spoke on the inevitability of death, as enunciated in the Four Noble Truth, and quoted various parables to drive in the point.

To Visakha, a deeply emotional and affectionate grandmother who lost her grand-daughter, the Buddha consoled her as following:-

"From affection spring grief,
from affection spring fear,
for one who is wholly free from affection,
there is no grief, much less fear."

On another occasion, when Kisagotami who had lost her only infant son, approached the Buddha to bring back her son to life, she was requested to bring back some mustard seed from a home where no death had taken place. The lady could find the mustard seed but she could not find a family where death had not previously occurred; hence realisation came to her that death did not afflict her child alone but was a common phenomena to all living beings.

Patacara was another tragic case. She has lost her two children, her husband, her parents and her brother under very tragic circumstances. She was mad with grief and was running about in the streets. Upon meeting the Buddha, she was consoled as follows:-

"There are no sons for one's protection, neither father nor even kinsmen for one who is over come by death. No protection is to be found among kinsmen.

Realising this fact, let the virtuous and wise person swiftly clear the way that leads to Nibbana."

Hearing the Buddha's consoling words, and appreciating the nature of life, she attained the first stage of sainthood and entered the Order of Nuns.

REAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR WOMEN

The establishment of the Bhikkuni Sangha - the Order of Nuns, in the 5th year of the Buddha ministry, really paved the way for full religious freedom for women in the days of the Buddha. It was a splendid success. There arose many eminent nuns who shone brilliantly in the study and practice of the Dhamma. In the eyes of the world, Buddhism was raised to a very high level. The Psalms of the Sisters (Therigatha) containing 77 verses by individual nuns is one of the prides of Buddhist literature.

The Buddha did not place any restrictions on the nuns in the matter of teaching and preaching of the Dhamma. The Bhikkuni Order produced a remarkable number of brilliant preachers and exponents of the Dhamma e.g Sukha, Patacara, Khema, Dhammadinna and Maha Pajapati (the foster mother of the Buddha). Buddhism never shared the Brahmin's view that a son was essential for the father's passage to heaven. Daughters became quite as good as sons and marriage was no longer a compulsory necessity. The Buddha by granting women an active share in the religious life, also helped to raise their status in secular life as well.

However the admission of women into the Order was a step too advanced for the period and became short-lived. Whenever an innovation or improvement was in advance of the thinking and development of a people during a particular era, the people were unable to adapt themselves to the improved conditions and tended to regress back to the society they were used to. They failed to master the situation. Hostile propaganda by the Brahmins who found their caste system undermined and privileges giving way was also a factor that caused the decline of the Order.

In Sri Lanka, the Order of Nuns flourished till 1017 A.C. in the reign of King Mahinda IV. It then disappeared and was not revived again. But the Order of Nuns was introduced in China by Sinhala nuns, and still exists there as well as in Japan today.

TOWARDS EQUALITY AND FREEDOM

With the advent of the modern era in the 19th and 20th century, a far cry from the days of the Buddha, women's emancipation and quest for freedom and equality had achieved tremendous strides, particularly in the West. This was the result of modern trends and modern education for women in all seats of higher learning.

Lead by Susan B. Anthony, the American pioneer unfurled the flag of equality for women in the year 1848 - just slightly over 130 years ago. Since then, the movement and struggle, with wider objectives, had forged ahead all over the world under the inspired leadership of many capable and leading pioneer women and women's organisations. They believed that women had a role to play in patriotic fellowship with their menfolk in contributing to the building of a better world through building a better society and country.

Since 1848 the world has witnessed innumerable popular organised movements for equal educational opportunities, equal political rights and economic equality for women. In the West, the status of women was enhanced by the conditions generated by the industrial revolution, humanitarian movements and women's movement for equality. In Asia and other countries which were not so industrially advanced, the change was brought about by reformers with a strong religious background.

During the last fifty to sixty years, the steady process of increasing women's participation in the economic, social as well as the political life of their countries had been forging ahead steadily. The success achieved by women in the twentieth century can only be described as phenomenal. Many women had achieved success in their various fields of endeavour - in social science, in business, in economics and in the political field. In some countries, women had even succeeded in capturing the top most political appointments - as Prime Minister of their land - although ironically enough, in certain countries, women have yet to be given the franchise - the right to vote!

International action to raise the status of women began in a small way with the defunct League of Nations, after the First World War. Subsequently the United Nations Charter went further to grant the principles of equality and freedom to all women. An organ of the United Nations, the Commission on the status of women, probed the question of discrimination based on sex and deliberated on questions touching on the political rights of women, equal pay for equal work, the status of women in common law, the nationality of married women, educational and economic opportunities for women, technical assistance and participation by women.

Though much had been accomplished through women's suffragettes and international organisations such as those sponsored by the United Nations in relation to greater women's participation in the social, economic and political fields, it is pertinent to observe that the question of real freedom for women had yet to be achieved.

Real freedom is the freedom that is free from all forms of bondage. It can be achieved only through the proper spiritual development and purification of one's own mind - purging and cleansing oneself from all taints of greed, hatred and delusion. No amount of public debates, demonstrations and universal charters could bring true freedom - except through one's own diligence and heedfulness by the regular practice of meditation as taught by the Buddha.

For promoting the cause of women, the Buddha can be considered as the first emancipator of women and promoter of women and promoter of a democratic way of life. It is to the eternal credit of the Buddha-Dhamma that women were not despised and looked down but were given equal status with men in their spiritual endeavour on the way to gain wisdom and the complete deliverance - Nibbana.

OPEN TO ALL IS THE GATEWAY TO COMPLETE DELIVERANCE